

The urban horse: Equestrian traffic and horse husbandry in late medieval cities

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Since the thriving of European cities in the 11th century, there was an increasing demand for faster and more reliable exchange services comparable with those in the Roman Empire: After the decline of the well-developed and regularly maintained Roman road network, circulation of people, goods and services had become less effective, particularly given that carriage traffic was virtually impossible on deteriorated roads. Consequently, equestrian traffic gained more importance in the medieval period, particularly in long-distance travels. In order to facilitate mobility and communication between cities, institutionally controlled mounted courier services were promoted and courier horses provided as well as travel horses for hire – both specially trained for their purpose. Moreover, decrees were adopted which regulated animal waste disposal and corpse removal to guarantee a hygienic living environment for both humans and animals. At the same time, specialized systems and structures for horse husbandry in the urban settings arose.

The paper displays the characteristics, capacities and limitations of urban equestrian traffic and horse husbandry in the Late Middle Ages and presents the impact of the human-horse relationship in the urban environment. Pragmatic documents such as (travel) account books and legal texts were used as source base; they were analyzed using a comparative and quantitative methodology. In addition, the reflection of the urban horse in material culture was considered to emphasize a more dynamic dimension of the phenomenon. To conclude, the value of the urban horse in medieval townscapes, either as a daily companion or as a mere commodity, is discussed.